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sociological and philosophical traditions**

Kieser, Alfred ; Seidl, David

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Communication-Centered Approaches in German Management Research: The Influence of Sociological and Philosophical Traditions

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Alfred Kieser¹ and David Seidl²

In contrast to many other countries, particularly the United States and Canada, in the German-speaking parts of the world, research on organizational communication that addresses organizations *as* communicative phenomena (see Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996) is conducted almost exclusively by scholars affiliated with faculties of business and management in academic institutions. While management scholars have discovered the communication lens as a powerful tool for studying organizational phenomena, scholars in the field of communication studies have not taken any particular interest in organization theory. As a consequence, German-speaking researchers in organizational communication typically focus on issues of organization and management and employ the communication lens only as a means of dealing with these questions.

Like many other areas in German management studies (Ortmann & Seidl, 2011), the field of organizational communication is strongly influenced by concepts originating in sociology and philosophy. More precisely, the theories of five eminent European sociologists or philosophers—namely, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Niklas Luhmann, John Austin, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault have shaped five distinct communication-centered streams of

¹Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, Germany

²University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

Corresponding Author:

Alfred Kieser, Professor of Management Theory, Department Corporate Management and Economics, Zeppelin University, Am Seemooser Horn 20, Friedrichshafen, 88045, Germany.
Email: alfred.kieser@zu.de

research on organizations. These streams form the basis of different perspectives on organizations and on specific organizational problems, which can fruitfully complement organizational communication research conducted outside the German-speaking countries (Jablin & Putnam, 2001). However, until now, the exchange of ideas between different research communities has been somewhat hampered by the fact that much of the communication-centered research on organizations has been published only in German language. To redress this problem, the aim of our paper is to explain the theoretical foundations of the distinct research streams briefly introduced above and to point out their particularities, as well as potential connections and complementarities, with research on organizational communication in North America (see Schoeneborn, 2011).

Five Streams of Communication-Centered Approaches in German-Speaking Management Research

As mentioned above, within German-speaking academia, communication-centered research on organizations can be differentiated into five different streams, based on the ideas of five different eminent social theorists. The most prominent stream among these draws on the works of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. The researchers who represent this stream belong mainly to the group that has formed around Werner Kirsch at the University of Munich (e.g., Kirsch & Knyphausen, 1991; Knyphausen, 1992; Seidl & Becker, 2006; Seidl, 2007) and around Alfred Kieser at the University of Mannheim (Kieser, 2002; Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Kieser & Nicolai, 2005). In line with Luhmann's (1995) theory of autopoietic social systems, they conceptualize organizations as systems that consist of communications (in particular decision communications) and reproduce themselves through the communications of which they consist. This conceptualization has two important aspects: First, it stresses the self-referential constitution of the organization. That is to say, all organizational phenomena have to be explained on the basis of the internal dynamics of communicative events within a given organization. Second, it posits a strict differentiation between the organization and its environment, which, as a result, necessitates the reconceptualization of how these two relate: Instead of inputs, the environment can only cause "perturbations" in the organization's internal communications, which are processed according to the organization's own logic. These two aspects have oriented the attention of researchers within this stream toward the internal dynamics of organizational communication,

including topics such as the development of organizational identity (Seidl, 2005) or the emergence of novelty and change (Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Knyphausen, 1992), and toward the different mechanisms through which organization and environment interrelate, including topics such as the relation between organizations and consultants (Kieser & Wellstein, 2007; Mohe & Seidl, 2011) or that between organization and organization science (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). We will discuss some of these in more detail further down.

The second stream of research, which partly overlaps with the one we have just described, is based on the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001). Researchers who represent this stream (and who mainly belong to the Werner Kirsch group) draw particularly on Wittgenstein's concept of language games. Organizations, they argue, are made up of multiple language games that provide different linguistic contexts for communication and action (Eckert, 1998; Kirsch, Seidl, & van Aaken, 2010). These language games (and their conventions and rules about language use) condition the way in which organizational members experience and engage with the world. Depending on the language game, the world is experienced differently by the participants; these different experiences are likely to lead to different behaviors. Thus, language games are not only about how people communicate; they are also closely linked to behaviors and actions, or what Wittgenstein termed "life-forms" (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 23). Somewhat similarly to the stream of research described above, which is based on Luhmann's works, researchers in this second stream use Wittgenstein's work to emphasize barriers to communication. Even though in this perspective the barriers between language games are not considered to be as strict as they are in the perspective of Luhmann's social systems, communication across different language games is treated as highly problematic. Accordingly, communication often results in unavoidable misunderstandings that typically lead to the creation of new meaning, rather than in a simple transfer of meaning between language games. In this approach, however, the boundaries between language games do not correspond to the boundaries of the organization: Not only are there multiple language games within each organization (which correspond, for example, to different functional domains or to different subsidiaries), but also these language games do not necessarily stop at the organizational boundary; they often cut across it. This is evident in much of the literature in this stream, which addresses both the relation between communication that takes place within and communication that takes place outside the organization and the relation between different communications (i.e., instances of communication) within the organization—for example, studies on the mechanisms that

make it possible to coordinate work across different language games within the organization (Kirsch et al., 2009).

The third research stream is based on the works of Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987). Some of the researchers in this stream belong to the Werner Kirsch group, while others belong to a group that has formed around Horst Steinmann at Erlangen University. In contrast to the research described above, here the focus is not so much on the differentiation between communication systems or language games but on different forms of communication and on the types of resulting interaction. Habermas's concept of communicative action, or communicative rationality (1984), is central to this stream of research. Habermas's concept describes the effort to coordinate actions on the basis of reasoned arguments and common understandings rather than instrumental rationality, which is understood as the strict pursuit of one's own goals. While Habermas (1987) assumed that organizations are characterized by instrumental rationality, other authors have been arguing that organizations are very well capable of communicative rationality (Kirsch, 1992; Kirsch & Knyphausen, 1993; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). In their largely normative studies, these authors argue that organizations—especially corporations—have to develop the capability of communicative rationality by engaging in open, nonhierarchical dialogue with their various internal and external stakeholders; to achieve this dialogue they need to create so-called “ideal speech situations.” Such discursive forms of legitimizing organizational actions become increasingly important as organizations operate in increasingly pluralistic contexts and as traditional regulatory frameworks are called into question (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

The fourth research stream consists of a number of programmatic papers by Günther Ortmann (2004, 2011), which draw on John Austin's (1962) concept of performative speech acts. In these papers, Ortmann calls on researchers to acknowledge the performative powers of *organizational* communication. Due to the organizational structures and rules, which are themselves brought forth through performative speech acts, communication within organizations produces results that could not have been produced by other means. If individuals speak as members of an organization, their communication possesses different performative powers from those it would possess if they spoke as private persons. Apart from individual organizational members, Ortmann also conceptualizes organizations themselves as communicative actors—a view that shows interesting parallels to the views put forward by the Montreal School (e.g., Cooren, 2010); he even suggests that organizations are the most powerful communicators of modernity (Ortmann, 2011, p. 356). Interestingly, the recognition of organizations as communicators is itself the result of performative speech acts; that is, the organization constitutes its identity as an

actor through performative speech acts, which grant it enhanced performative powers of communication.

The fifth research stream, which comprises a number of empirical studies by Ronald Hartz and his colleagues (Hartz, 2009; Hartz, Kranz, & Steger, 2009a, 2009b), is based on the works of Michel Foucault (1973, 1991). In contrast to the other four streams described above, the focus here is not so much on the communication within or between organizations but on the societal macrodiscourses, which bring forth certain organizational forms and phenomena. Even though most of the relevant research is published in German, there are strong links to studies on organizational discourse published on the international level.

Studies on the Communication Within and Between Consultancies and Client Organizations

To illustrate the novelty and distinctiveness of the insights generated by the five streams, this section and the following one will take a look at the two most prominent topics within these streams: The relation between client and consultant and the relation between research and practice in the field of organization. Both topics have been studied more intensely within the Luhmann-based research tradition.

When Luhmann's theory is applied to the analysis of communication within consultancies and between consultancies and their client organizations, it becomes clear that these two systems develop their own "logic" of communication, which renders communications meaningful. This finding implies that direct communication across different systems is impossible: A communication that makes sense in one system assumes a different meaning in another system. In this sense, social systems are *operatively* closed (or "autopoietic"): All communications within a system are produced by the system itself; no communications can enter the system from outside. However, social systems react to certain kinds of communication produced outside their boundaries. This reaction is described as *structural* or *interactional openness* (Seidl & Becker, 2006).

On the basis of this theory, Kieser and Ernst (Ernst & Kieser, 2002; Kieser, 1997, 2002) argue that direct communication between consultancies and companies is not possible. Consultancies "perturb" client companies by propagating "management fashions" with the intention of generating demand for consulting services. What makes management fashions attractive to companies is predominantly their inconsistency, ambiguity, and nonfalsifiability

(Benders & Bijsterveld, 2000), which allow consultancies to frame the company's problems in a way that is suitable for communication within the consultancy and for the company to contract a consulting project. However, the company's interpretation of its problems is not consistent with that of the contracted consultancy, which uses a different logic for diagnosing and tackling problems. Since direct communication between the consultancy and the client organization is not possible in the sense described above, consulting operates through structural coupling in which a third system is involved—the “contact system” (Mohe & Seidl, 2011). The contact system mediates between the other two systems so that implemented changes in the client organization are likely to be categorized as successful both by the consultancy and by the client organization. Mediation occurs through mechanisms such as “prototyping” (Schmickl & Kieser, 2008), according to which both sides draft and suggest solutions to specific problems that they repeatedly discuss and change until both signal satisfaction with the outcome, or “boundary objects” (Star, 1989), that is, artifacts such as PowerPoint presentations that take on a highly specific and simultaneously different meaning for the systems involved. This research echoes recent studies on the communicative constitution of interorganizational partnerships, which argue that the overall value of these partnerships lies in the partners' “ability to substantially influence the people and issues within their problem domain” (Koschmann, Kuhn, & Pfarrer, 2012).

Studies on the Communication Between the System of Management Science and the System of Management Practice

While research in organizational communication typically takes the organization—perceived as a communicative entity—as a starting point (e.g., Cooren, 2010; Kuhn, 2008), in the German-speaking countries, research tends to take the organization's environment as a starting point and to examine whether the organization can cope with its environment and, if so, in what ways. An example of such research explores to what extent and in what ways business firms can make use of the scientific discourse and its “practical relevance” (Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). These works emphasize that direct communication between the system of management science and that of management practice is impossible (e.g., Bort & Kieser, 2011; Kieser & Leiner, 2009) since both systems are considered to be self-referentially closed, i.e. each operates according to its own inherent logic. As a result, these systems can only “perturb” each other (Kieser & Leiner, 2009;

Nicolai, 2004; Nicolai & Seidl, 2010; Rasche & Behnam, 2009; Seidl, 2009). To communicate research results in a way that is accessible to practitioners, scholars have to shift from the logic and style of the scientific discourse to the logic and communication style of practitioners (Kieser, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusion

As we have shown in the preceding sections, there are several streams of communication-centered organization research in German-speaking academia. Being based on different theoretical concepts and assumptions, these streams offer different approaches to understanding organizational phenomena. Each stream conceptualizes the relation between communication and organization according to its particular theoretical basis. The most radical amongst them is the stream based on Luhmann's works, which conceptualizes organizations as consisting only of communication, while the other streams treat communication merely as a central element of organizations—one of several elements. A second characteristic is the level of analysis on which each stream focuses. While the stream that centers on Foucault's ideas tends to focus on macrodiscourses on the societal level, the streams based on Luhmann's and Habermas's theories tend to focus on the meso-level of the organization, and the streams that draw on Wittgenstein's and Austin's theories on the microlevels. Another difference between the five streams is normativity. While the Habermasian and Foucauldian streams tend to take a critical perspective on the effects of organizational communication, the other streams tend to be more descriptive.

Their differences notwithstanding, the research streams examined here share an intellectual approach that is typical of much of management research conducted in German-speaking academia (Ortmann & Seidl, 2010). More specifically, as we have seen, all streams are based on and guided by the work of an eminent European sociologist or philosopher. The philosophical or sociological works underlying each stream are typically of a more general nature, granting researchers a more holistic view of the organization. A second commonality is that all except the Foucauldian stream are in line with the "Teutonic intellectual style" (Galtung, 1981), in that the respective research is predominantly conceptual while empirical data is primarily used for the purpose of illustration rather than as a means of advancing or testing theories. In those streams, theory is typically advanced deductively from either a single or a small number of concepts, such as autopoietic closure (Luhmann), language games (Wittgenstein), communicative rationality (Habermas), or performative speech acts (Austin). A third commonality is that each of these

conceptual/theoretical approaches is often combined with reflections on the underlying philosophy of science, echoing the general interest in “paradigm analysis,” which characterizes the Teutonic intellectual style as a whole (Galtung, 1981). This commonality is especially pronounced in the studies on the relation between management science and practice described above in the context of research drawing on Luhmann’s works.

Beyond these general intellectual commonalities, another common point of the streams examined here is that they are all located within the field of management studies, as we have already pointed out. Consequently, much of the respective research concerns questions pertinent to organizations. This relevance is evident in the specific topics that are addressed, which include, for example, the relation between consultancies and client organizations or the relation between organization science and organization practice. Because of the range of topics that it covers and the range of perspectives it offers, German scholarship has the potential to enrich the international field of organizational communication by opening up new research topics that have been ignored by other communication researchers so far and by expanding the concept of “organization” in communication-centered research of organizations. We hope that our paper will contribute to unleashing this potential.

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Author Biographies

Alfred Kieser (University of Cologne, Germany) is a professor emeritus of organizational behavior at the University of Mannheim, Germany. He presently teaches management theory at Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, Germany. He has received honorary doctoral degrees from the University of Munich, Germany, and Corvinus University Budapest, Hungary, and is a member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences. His work has been published in various leading journals in management and organization studies, among them are *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization*, *Organization Science*, and *Organization Studies*. His research interests include the history of organization, organizational evolution, cross-cultural comparisons of organizations, management fashions, consulting, and organizational learning.

David Seidl (University of Cambridge, United Kingdom) is a full professor of organization and management at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and research associate at the Centre for Business Research (CBR) at Cambridge University, United Kingdom. His work has been published in a variety of leading organization and management journals, among them are *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization*, and *Organization Studies*. His current research focuses on the dynamics of standardization, the practices of strategy and organizational consulting.